

The Anatomy of a Fall

2 Samuel 11, 12

During training exercises, a lieutenant driving down a muddy road encountered another vehicle stuck in the mud with a red-faced colonel at the wheel.

“Your jeep stuck, sir?” asked the lieutenant as he pulled alongside.

“Nope,” replied the colonel, coming over and handing him the keys, “Yours is.”

A story of an atrocious abuse of power is the second-most recognizable biblical narrative about David. David slaying Goliath inspires us. The story of David and Bathsheba disturbs us. He was at the height of his power. One day, he saw a beautiful woman, the wife of another man. As king, he took what he wanted. He slept with the woman. He impregnated her. He orchestrated the death of her husband to cover up his adultery. This was not David’s finest hour. Why does the Bible tear down so many of its greatest heroes by exposing lurid details that tarnish their luster?

The reluctance of the Bible to whitewash the sins of key characters testifies to its reliability. Legends about great men touch only on their most remarkable exploits and praiseworthy virtues. George Washington could not tell a lie. Davy Crockett killed a bear when he was only three.

In the Bible, however, the same Samson who killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass was a complete imbecile in matters of the heart. The first thing Noah did after stepping off the ark and offering a sacrifice was to get plastered. The same Solomon who was renowned for his wisdom led his nation into idolatry. The same Moses who led his people out of slavery in Egypt never entered the Promised Land because of his own disobedience. David killed a giant with a sling. Later, he slept with the wife of a loyal soldier, whom he killed. No one can say that’s not a fair and balanced biographical treatment of Israel’s greatest king.

Here was a man who had experienced the hand of God as few others have. David lacked nothing and yet, we find him sinning as ingloriously as any man has ever sinned. It doesn’t make sense, but the truth is that sin doesn’t make sense for any of us. God has proven Himself worthy of our obedience, loyalty, devotion and gratitude. Still, our propensity for sin is woven into the fabric of our being. Is there anything that we can glean from David’s inglorious fall that might instruct us in more effectively guarding ourselves against the onslaughts of temptation?

I. The Roots of David’s Sin

A. A Self-Satisfied Complacency

¹In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. – 2 Samuel 11:1

This conflict with the Ammonites was a continuation of the one that began when the king of Ammon had humiliated a delegation of David’s men that he had sent simply to extend his condolences on the occasion of the death of that king’s father. When the Ammonites hired a number of Arameans (or Syrians) as mercenaries, David’s original conflict with the Ammonites took a back seat while he dealt with the Arameans. Now, with the arrival of Spring, David sent Joab, the commander of his armies, to finish dealing with the Ammonites.

Kings went to war in the Spring because the rainy season had passed and the roads were firm. Also, with winter crops ready for harvest, raiding an enemy's fields was a cheap way to feed an army. But, something here is amiss at the outset. Kings were essentially known by their prowess in battle, but David was in Jerusalem while his armies were at war. Had David attained prosperity beyond the capacity of his character to endure it? Had David's unbroken string of political success and the acquisition of absolute power intoxicated the king with an air of invincibility?

David Stolinsky takes our modern culture to task for its narcissistic sense of entitlement: "Look out the window and you can see people. But if you silver the glass, it becomes a mirror, and all you can see is yourself. One of the side effects of affluence is that it provides us with more silver to block out others and concentrate on ourselves." This is an important warning for us all, but it is also an apt picture of where David was at this point in his life.

B. A Self-Indulgent Lifestyle

²One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. – 2 Samuel 12:2

It is normal in that part of the world to avoid laboring through the blistering heat of the day by taking what Spanish-speaking countries call a siesta. However, the idea here is that David had slept the day away. Had this become the norm for David – lolling away the day in comfort while others in his administration took responsibility for national security? David appears to have become a man who desperately needed to fill his time with something worthwhile – doing a little wood-working or gardening, joining a gym, writing his memoirs or starting a bug collection.

Actually, David had started a collection. He had been collecting wives for some time. On the one hand, it almost seems that God winked at this because of His larger purposes for David. On the other hand, much of the grief in David's life was the result of his inability to appreciate the virtue of monogamy. One might think that having a harem would satisfy a man's sexual passions. History does not bear that out. It seems to only fuel passion all the more. But, David's problem was not simply one of sensual passion. He had grown dangerously accustomed to having what he wanted.

C. A Self-Gratifying Leer

²One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful ... – 2 Samuel 11:2

Delicately recounting the story of David and Bathsheba for preschoolers proved a bit challenging for the producers of *Veggie Tales*. In "King George and the Duck," Larry the Cucumber stars as King George and Bob the Tomato is his faithful servant, Lewis. The perks of royalty do not appeal to King George. He loves bathing with his rubber duck. Splishing and splashing, he sings an ode to his rubber duck called, "I Love My Duck." One day while standing on the royal balcony, he peers through binoculars and sees a rubber duck that belongs to Billy, who happens to be bathing with his duck on his own balcony. Billy's rubber duck looks exactly like King George's rubber duck. Nonetheless, the king covets it, exclaiming, "I want it."

Lewis reminds the king that the other duck belongs to someone else. Then, Lewis opens a large wardrobe overflowing with hundreds of identical rubber ducks and says, "If I could just jog your memory, you already have quite a few ducks." King George's rationale is simple. He shoots a condescending look at his naïve servant and replies, "Those are yesterday's ducks."

From his roof, David sees a beautiful woman bathing. The culture was very protective of its women, so it is unlikely that the king innocently or inadvertently saw Bathsheba. It was more likely one of those deals where if you leaned out over the railing, wrapped your leg around a certain tree branch and cocked your head just right, you could see what you were looking for. But, even if a design flaw by the builder made the view much less complicated than that, it would still be inappropriate for David to have continued to watch the woman. The progression from leering to an actionable offense was predictable. James writes:

... ¹⁴but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. – James 1:14, 15

After David sleeps with Bathsheba, the text parenthetically notes, “She had purified herself from her uncleanness” (verse 4). But, the verb tense suggests that she had done this first, before her encounter with David. In other words, she was probably spotted by David in the first place while undergoing her monthly post-cycle purification bath. The household of Uriah would know unequivocally that she was NOT pregnant before she went to David’s house. Of course, Uriah himself would be clueless, for he has been out in the field through all of this. So, when Bathsheba recites her only recorded lines, “I am pregnant,” David immediately shifts into damage-control mode.

D. A Self-Serving Cover-up

As bad as the crime was, the cover-up was worse. David quickly sent for Uriah from the field and said, “What’s up? How’s the battle going?” This was pretense. David told Uriah, “Go down to your house and wash your feet.” This was a euphemism for “Enjoy some R&R with your wife.” If Uriah slept with Bathsheba just once, David would be off the hook. But, David did not anticipate that Uriah was too noble a soldier to enjoy himself at home while his comrades were at war. Uriah slept at the palace entrance with the servants. The next day, David figured, “I’ll just get him drunk,” but he could not get Uriah drunk enough to abandon his scruples.

David sinks to his lowest point as he sends Uriah back to the front with what was essentially his own death warrant. The message ordered Joab to put Uriah at the fiercest point of the battle and then to withdraw, hanging him out to dry. The loyal but misguided Joab embellished the plan to make it seem less suspicious. He sent Uriah to the city wall where Uriah and a number of other men Joab deemed expendable were killed. Fighting at a city wall had been deemed a bad idea ever since the days of the judges when a woman dropped a millstone on a certain warrior’s head. David would be furious with Joab, but Joab told the messenger, “If you see the king heating up, just tell him, “By the way, Uriah the Hittite is dead.” When David heard these words, Israel’s seasoned warrior hypocritically responded, “Things like that happen. War is ugly business.”

II. The Rubble of David’s Sin

A. David Harmed His Own Intimacy with God

The months roll by. David takes Bathsheba as a wife. When a son is born, a few eyebrows are raised, but there’s no hard proof that David has done anything wrong. It’s like trying to prove steroids exist in baseball. All the evidence seems to point in a certain direction but locking down the hard proof is slippery. David shows no outer sign of repenting or cracking.

Nathan, David's courageous prophet and advisor, comes to the king and spins a story about a rich man with many head of livestock and a poor man who had only one ewe lamb, which was treated as a part of the family. When the rich man hosted a traveler, rather than slaughter one of his many sheep to feed his guest, he takes the lamb of the poor man. Nathan asked David, "What do you think of a fellow like that?" David is incensed. He feels that the man deserves death, but since stealing a sheep could never be considered a capital offense, he simply blusters his contempt for the rich man and judges that he should reimburse the poor man four times over.

David does not need the parable explained any further when Nathan announces, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). Though David's outer facade had remained intact, his writings indicate that grief, guilt and despair had been doing a job on him for some time. He immediately and authentically confessed, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13). As painful as the exposure of his guilt was, it paved the way to a restoration for which his spirit had been longing. All these months, this man after God's heart had sensed only distance from God.

³When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. – Psalm 32:3, 4

B. David Undermined His Divine Calling

David had been elevated to a place of honor, but for a purpose. That purpose was not to live an unaccountable life. He was to shepherd God's people as well as be their king. Now, two people charged to David's care, had become victims of David's whim and capricious abuse of power.

In addition to failing his people as a shepherd, David scandalized his witness. Nathan said: "... you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt ..." (2 Samuel 12:14). As in any community, there were those who were indifferent to the things of God. Now that David's sins were public, this indifference would give way to ridicule. Here was a king who saw himself as a writer of psalms and a worship leader. He had ascended to the throne allegedly because he loved God more than the previous king. David's fall was more troublesome than the sum-totals of the falls of all the high-profile ministers and television evangelists who have ever fallen.

C. David Devastated His Own Home Life

Nathan would not let up on the king:

... ¹⁰ Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'

¹¹"This is what the LORD says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. ¹²You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.'" – 2 Samuel 12:10-12

David's family became the poster-children for family dysfunction in Israel. Things got off to a sordid start when one of his sons raped a half-sister. That son was killed by another son. This son would later lead a coup attempt against David. In the midst of that rebellion, this son slept in public with David's concubines in fulfillment of Nathan's words. After David died, Solomon, the heir to the throne, executed still another son who was maneuvering for the throne. It is as if God honored David's recommended sentence that the man in the parable pay for his crime four times over. David would lose the child of this illicit union and three other sons as well.

III. The Remedy for David's Sin

A. God Removed David's Sin

To his credit, David did not hesitate to come clean. He could have lied, trying to determine if Nathan really knew what he thought he knew. Instead, he immediately admitted that he had sinned against the LORD. In the midst of Nathan's harsh rebuke, he slipped David a note of comfort: "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die" (- 2 Samuel 12:13).

There is no explanation given in the text as to why God did this. We can only infer that it was because God had made a promise to David and that promise could not be broken. What is clear is that this was a work of divine grace. David knew he deserved to die. He had executed others for far less. How could a man sink from such a lofty height to such a mud-hole? If grace is an unmerited gift from God, how else can we describe God's dealings with his broken king?

B. God Did Not Remove All the Debris of David's Sin

David was forgiven, but the luster was definitely off the crown. Heartache and tragedy would follow him. Nothing he would accomplish from this day forward would ever bring him the same glory as had his earlier exploits. In God's wisdom, to have allowed David to enjoy the son born to Bathsheba would have sent the wrong message about the severity of David's sins. In desperation, David fasted and prayed for the sick child right up until the moment he died, but then he accepted the Lord's judgment on the matter. Someone might question, "Was that really grace at all?"

Grace means to no longer stand before God as a guilty sinner. That's the big issue. Are we still in fellowship with Him? Is our eternity secure? To demand that grace remove all the debris caused by our sins is to cheapen grace and to trivialize sin. If there were never negative consequences when we sin, we would inevitably conclude that sin doesn't really matter that much to God. God disciplines us because He loves us. It is the long-run, big picture at the end of the age that He is most interested in. Willful sin deserves a spanking now and then. Paul once wisely observed:

... ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. ³²When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. - 1 Corinthians 11:31, 32

C. Grace Always Finds a Way

A child died so that David might not enjoy the fruit of his sin. Three other sons died because David's family-life was a disaster. But, centuries later, another son of David would die, not as an immediate discipline for any one person's sins, but as a once-for-all-time satisfaction of God's judgment on the sins of every man, woman and child who has ever lived or ever will. How could God take David's most heinous sin ever and simply set it aside? He could do so because Jesus died for that sin. You might think, "Wow! It's great to be David." I would instead prefer that you understand that the very same grace of God is yours by means of faith in the very same Jesus.